



WISCONSIN EDUCATION ASSOCIATION COUNCIL

To: Members of the Assembly Committee on Education
From: Wisconsin Education Association Council
Date: May 3, 2011
Re: Assembly Bill 110 (Special Needs Scholarship Program)

The Wisconsin Education Association Council opposes Assembly Bill 110, establishing a Special Needs Scholarship Program, because it defunds public education through a privatization voucher scheme that results in a loss of protection under the law for parents and their children.

Under Assembly Bill 110, the Department of Public Instruction would be authorized to pay the voucher amount directly to a chosen private school, even a religious private school, funded through a reduction in state aid paid to the resident school district. The legislation would also require the resident school district to provide transportation, even if the private school is located five miles beyond the school district's boundaries.

At a time when Governor Walker's state budget proposal would slash \$834 million from public schools and \$1.68 billion in revenue limit authority, Assembly Bill 110 would further strain school district budgets and make it even more difficult to meet the needs of students. The disinvestment in public schools promoted under this legislation to fund private schools is especially disconcerting given the lack of accountability measures. Would scholarship students attending private schools be required to take state assessments so taxpayers would have some way of knowing how students have fared? Would private school teachers have to meet minimum criteria for qualifications, such as a college degree or special training in the needs of children with disabilities? Under the bill, we won't even know the results of a proposed contracted-out study of the program until year 2015.

Contrast this with the accountability demanded of public schools and districts under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The public schools must include children with disabilities in state- and district-wide assessments and publicly report the average achievement of this group. Teachers of students with disabilities must be highly qualified and demonstrate knowledge and skills in the subjects they teach. Furthermore, special education teachers must be licensed by DPI as special education teachers. Our state must monitor and evaluate school district policies and procedures for developing and implementing an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and for processing complaints. It also must correct deficiencies in program operations, insure proper accounting of federal funds, and make annual reports on the academic achievement of children being served.

While sacrificing accountability, Assembly Bill 110 would also set up a scenario where parents and children lose rights. When parents accept a voucher, deemed a scholarship under the bill, to help defray the costs of private school for their child with special needs, they sacrifice protections under IDEA, including due process in the event the IEP is not fully implemented. Private schools may decline to accept students based on their disability, could decline to abide by the IEPs of students they do accept, or could segregate children with needs from other children. Private schools may also suspend or expel students without due process, and these schools are under no obligation to provide alternative education or services after such action.

The best way to ensure that every child has access to a free, quality education is to invest in our public schools and in proven strategies to meet the needs of students with disabilities, rather than risky voucher schemes that offer parents empty promises and call upon them to give up federally protected rights. For all of these reasons, please oppose Assembly Bill 110.

If you have any questions, please contact Deb Sybell, WEAC Legislative Program Coordinator, at (608) 298-2327 or sybeld@weac.org.

Mary Bell, President

Dan Burkhalter, Executive Director

